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ABSTRACT

Results are reported from two studies examining stability and change in children's friendships within the context of two theoretical perspectives: cognitive-developmental and ecological. A total of 112 first- and fourth-grade children participated in the first study; 114 fourth- and eighth-grade children participated in the second. In the fall and spring of the school year, children were asked to name their friends and rate their liking for other children in their grade. For the primary measure of friendship, pairs of friends were identified by a combination of best-friend nominations and ratings of liking on a five-point scale. A second measure of friendship was based on reciprocal best-friend nominations. For this measure, children were identified as friends if they named each other as best friends, regardless of their ratings of liking for others. In general, results from both studies indicated that the stability of friendships did not increase between first and eighth grade, although it did increase regularly between first and fourth. The interplay between cognitive and ecological factors is considered to be a possible explanation for these results. (MP)

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Changes in Friendship During a School Year

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Having friends is considered an important part of children's social and personality development, but is it important for children to form lasting relationships? Do children's friendships typically last throughout the school year? Research on the stability of existing friendships and the formation of new friendships has not directly answered these questions. Stability and change in friendships have been interpreted in the context of two major theoretical perspectives. First, the cognitive-developmental, or social-cognitive view suggests that stability in friendships relates to characteristics of individual children, such as their conceptions of friendship. Second, the ecological perspective links variations in children's social environment to changes in friendship.

Within the cognitive-developmental framework, it is suggested that young children lack the social skills that contribute to the maintainance of friendships, or they lack a conception of friendship as a relationship that goes beyond specific incidents of sharing and playing together (e.g., Duck, Meill, & Gaebler, 1980). As social skills improve and friendship conceptions become more mature, the stability of friendships is expected to increase. A few earlier studies suggested that the stability of friendships does increase regularly between 5 and 18 years of age (Horrocks & Buker, 1951; Horrocks & Thompson, 1946; Thompson & Horrocks, 1947). In these studies, however, reciprocal relationships were not examined and a fixed number of choices were required. Recent studies that are less subject to these measurement problems have shown that most best-friend nominations by fourth graders and older children remain stable over periods of several months, particularly if these nominations are reciprocated (Berndt, 1982).

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The new data on the stability of friendships in middle childhood and adolescence are most compatible with a second type of explanation for changes in friendships. From an ecological perspective, variations in children's social environment should lead to changes in friendships. Changes in children's social environment, such as the transition to a new school, affect children's pool of potential friends. On the other hand, if older children and adolescents interact with a relatively stable group of peers in their schools and neighborhoods, they should develop relatively stable friendships.

Sex differences in the stability of friendships have also been examined. It has been suggested that girls have more exclusive friendships than boys do (Eder & Hallinan, 1978). In other words, girls prefer a close friendship with a single other girl more than boys do, and boys prefer cliques or larger groups more than girls. Girls also show less positive reactions towards nonfriends and newcomers (Eder & Hallinan, 1978; Feshbach, 1969; Feshbach & Sones, 1971), perhaps because they perceive the others as a threat to their friendships. If girls are reluctant to form new friendships, their existing friendships might be expected to be more stable than those of boys. Stability was greater for girls' than boys' friendships in several recent studies (Kon & Losenkov, 1978; Epstein, 1978) but not in another (Tuma & Hallinan, 1979). These mixed results make it difficult to speculate about sex differences in the stability of friendships.

The major purpose of the present studies was to examine children's friendships from first to eighth grade in the context of two theoretical perspectives. The studies were also designed to address methodological issues pertaining to the use of the sociometric method. In Study 1, the stability of friendships was expected to increase between first and fourth grade, either because fourth graders have

greater social skills and more mature friendship conceptions than do first graders or because fourth graders were with a more stable group of classmates for a longer time than first graders.

The second study allowed clearer comparison of these two types of explanations. If stability continued to increase between fourth and eighth grades, the cognitive-developmental view would appear to be plausible. A decrease or lack of change in stability could be interpreted in terms of ecological factors.

I will report today on two studies that examined changes in children's friendships between the fall and the spring of the same school year. The first study included 112 first and fourth graders; the second study included 114 fourth and eighth graders. In both studies there were roughly equal numbers of boys and girls at each grade level. The school was in a predominantly white, middle class community.

The children's friendships were assessed in the fall and spring of the school year by asking them to name their best friends and rate their liking for other children of the same sex in their grade. Children were allowed to name as many or as few friends as they wished. Ratings of liking were obtained using a 5-point scale. For the primary measure of friendship, pairs of friends were identified by a combination of best-friend nominations and ratings of liking. Children were considered close friends if either one or both of them nominated the other as a best friend and their ratings of liking averaged 4.0 or better on the 5-point scale (Berndt, 1981 a,b; 1982). In other words, children did not need to nominate one another but they did need to express a high degree of reciprocal liking. A second measure of friendship was based on reciprocal best-friend nominations. For this measure, children were identified as friends if they named each other as best friends, regardless of their ratings of liking for each other.

In order to determine whether children started the school year with a comparable number of friendships, the effect of age and sex on the number of fall friendships was examined. The number of friendships that children had in the fall of the school year did not vary with grade or sex when friendships were defined by the combination of nominations and ratings. In Study 1, fourth graders had more reciprocal nominations in the fall than did first graders.

The effect of age and sex on the number of friends children kept during the school year, the number they lost between the fall and the spring, and the number of new friends they made during the year were examined in separate analyses of variance. The mean scores on these variables for the two measures of friendship are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

For the measure based on nominations and ratings of liking there were age differences in the number of friends kept and lost. Fourth graders kept more of their old friends throughout the year than first graders did. Fourth graders lost fewer of their friends between the fall and the spring than first graders did. In other words, the stability of friendships increased between first and fourth grade when using the nominations and ratings measure. At both grades children made more new friends than they lost. This finding suggests that first and fourth graders did not differ in their ability to make friends because they made a similar number during the school year. The number of friends kept and lost did not vary with sex, but girls made significantly fewer friends than boys.

For the measure based on reciprocal nominations, the only significant effect was for the difference between grades in the number of friends kept from fall to spring. Fourth graders kept more of their old friends than did first graders. This finding may have been affected by fourth graders' larger number of reciprocal nominations in the fall in comparison to first graders.

Turning now to Study 2, the number of friendships children had in the fall of the school year did not vary with grade or sex when friendships were defined by the combination of nominations and ratings. However, eighth graders had more reciprocal nominations in the fall than did fourth graders.

The stability of friendships did not increase between fourth and eighth grade (see Table 2). For the measure of friendships based on nominations and ratings, the interaction of grade and sex was significant for the number of friendships kept from fall to spring. For boys, the number of friends kept throughout the school year increased with grade; for girls, the number decreased with grade. The number of friends lost during the school year did not vary with grade or sex. Fourth graders did make more new friends than did eighth graders. As a result, fourth graders gained more than they lost, and eighth graders lost more than they gained.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Similar results were found for the measure of reciprocal nominations. The number of friendships kept throughout the year varied with grade, and with the grade by sex interaction. As compared with fourth graders, eighth graders lost more friends and made fewer new friends.

The results of these two studies indicate that the stability of friendships does not increase regularly between first and eighth grade, although it does increase between first and fourth grade. In Study 1, fourth graders kept more and lost fewer of their old friends than first graders, demonstrating that stability does increase over this age range. The results provide partial support for the cognitive-developmental view; the increase in stability might be due to the fourth graders' more sophisticated social skills or understanding of friendship. Eighth graders' conception of friendship

as an intimate relation could explain why they lost more friends than they gained during the year. Emphasis upon intimacy in a relationship probably makes it difficult to maintain a large number of relationships. This explanation is supported by research on the emergence of intimate friendship in adolescence (see Berndt, 1982).

The findings provide partial support for the ecological perspective. Eighth graders may have made fewer new friends than fourth graders due to the emergence of cross-sex friendships in adolescence. That is, eighth graders' new cross-sex relationships may conflict with same-sex friendships. The conflicts may be especially intense for girls because they have closer and more intimate friendships than boys do (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). In addition, adolescent girls' earlier involvement in opposite sex friendships could have affected stability in same sex friendships. This explanation was supported by interview data from a related study; some eighth grade girls complained that their best friends spent less time with them and more time with older boyfriends.

Young children are said to lack the value of stability in a social relationship (Meill, 1978). Our results show that stability of friendships was high even at first grade. Over about a five-month interval, first graders kept about as many friendships as they lost. Thus it appears that young children do seem to maintain both transient and lasting relationships.

In considering functions of the 'short-term best friendship' versus those lasting throughout the school year one runs the risk of defining 'friendship' in a manner which is inconsistent with previous research. Reciprocity is considered to be an important aspect of friendship (Mannarino, 1980). But has reciprocity of liking, in naming others on a sociometric questionnaire, or a combination of the two been measured in previous research? The pattern of results

from a combined nominations and ratings measure and a reciprocal nominations measure is not highly similar suggesting that measurement error should be carefully considered in future research.

In summary, the results of the present studies indicate that the stability of friendships does not increase regularly between first and eighth grade, although it does increase between first and fourth grade. Both the cognitive-developmental and ecological explanations can account for these findings suggesting that the interplay between cognitive and ecological factors be considered in future research. Research on the formation of cliques and in particular the effects of clique formation on dyadic friendships in adolescence is needed. Finally, if variables such as the pattern of friendship gains and losses which contribute to stable friendships,and the ease with which children change friends are directly measured in future research, it may be possible to identify conditions under which stability in friendships contributes to social and personality development.

Table 1.

Study 1: Mean Scores for Changes in Friendship at Each Grade and Sex.

Measure	First Grade		Fourth Grade	
Nominations and ratings	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Old friends kept	1.97	1.94	2.97	3.19
Old friends lost	2.00	1.56	1.06	1.16
New friends gained	3.12	1.81	2.91	2.23
Reciprocal Nominations				
Old friends kept	.42	.25	.56	1.00
Old friends lost	.33	.75	.50	.55
New friends gained	1.30	1.13	1.13	1.29

Table 2

Study 2 Mean Scores for Changes in Friendship at Each Grade and Sex.

Measure	Fourth Grade		Eighth Grade	
Nominations and ratings	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Old friends kept	1.74	2.48	2.64	1.75
Old friends lost	1.15	1.08	1.32	1.81
New friends gained	1.94	2.24	.55	1.38
Reciprocal Nominations				
Old friends kept	.76	1.00	1.68	1.00
Old friends lost	.29	.32	.59	.91
New friends gained	.85	1.64	.32	.88

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